DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 199 738 CS 206 201

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TITLE Rewriting in Advanced Composition.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advanced Courses; Classroom Techniques; College English; College Freshmen; College Students; *Comparative Analysis; Higher Education; Introductory Courses; Peer Evaluation; Student Attitudes; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Advanced Composition; Freshman Composition; *Revision (Written Composition)

ABSTRACT

A college English instructor made an informal comparison of rewriting habits of students in a freshman composition course and two advanced composition courses. Notes kept on student rewriting focused on this central question: given peer and instructor response to their papers and a choice as to what and how to rewrite, what will students decide to change, and how effective will these changes be? Observing three levels of student work, the instructor drew several tentative conclusions, based on a continuum of relatively inexperienced to relatively advanced writing students. First, the more advanced the students, the more valuable rewriting may be, because inexperienced writers work more with surface errors while advanced writers are more aware of content and organization. Second, the more advanced the students, the more appropriate it is to have them rework their "better" papers. Teachers will need to sharpen their skills in suggesting significant improvements for papers already deserving an "A." Third, to encourage students to do that which they find difficult yet rewarding, the more advanced the students, the more revision of sentence structure should be emphasized. Finally, the more advanced the students, the more important peer evaluation is. Criticism of content is valued more if it comes from the instructor, while comments on style are valued more if they come from fellow students. (HTH)

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Rewriting in Advanced Composition

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Typically, advanced composition sections contain somewhat fewer, as well as somewhat better, students than do freshman composition classes. As a result, the advanced sections potentially allow for more individual conferences and peer evaluation, and for increased attention to style, tone and rewriting. In trying to take best advantage of this potential, I became interested in the latter--the role that rewriting should play in advanced composition, using this term to mean the revising of papers after they have been evaluated in some manner. I was concerned with such questions as: To what extent should students be asked to rewrite? Is it more valuable for them to redo better papers or poorer ones? Which aspects of a paper merit most attention in rewriting? Do students respond more to the reactions their writing produces in their instructors or in their fellow students? And so on.[1]

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In order to reach some conclusions about advanced composition, I thought it would be useful to consider these same questions in freshman composition. Actually, I was in a position to compare three levels of composition. I received the cooperation of the staff at my former school, the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, in studying rewriting in freshman composition. And I taught two variations of post-freshman composition, one (which I will call C 201) for any students having completed freshman composition, the other (here numbered C 301) for those making an "A" or a "B" in their previous composition courses. For the last two years, during which time I taught a combined total of nine sections of C 201 and C 301, involving some 150 students, I kept notes on student rewriting. I focused on the central question: given peer and instructor response to their papers, and a choice as to what and how to rewrite, what will students decide to change, and how effective will these changes be? I found clear differences between the levels: it appears that writers at the three levels of composition courses react differently to the task of revising. The differences form a pattern which, while not surprising, seems to me to have pedagogical implications for the effective teaching of advanced composition.

My study has been informal and impressionistic--writing improvement, for example, was measured entirely by my own subjective judgment--yet my impressions are not, I believe,

without value. If the conclusions I reached are necessarily limited and tentative, at the least they invite comparison with the experience of other instructors, and further testing.

FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

For freshman composition I distributed two questionnaires, one to the staff, and later, with my colleagues' help, one to students in freshman writing courses. Fifteen teachers, covering nearly all the freshman composition sections during one term, and ranging from TA's to veteran instructors, cooperated. The first questionnaire asked the staff members how they had used rewriting in their sections, and what results they had. Although two instructors required every paper to be rewritten, four others never made a rewriting assignment. Of those instructors who did require rewriting, nearly all indicated that rewritten papers were sometimes better, but frequently merely different. When improvement did occur, it seemed to result primarily from individual conferences with students (little peer evaluation was employed), and better students benefited more from rewriting than did weaker students. (Of course, there may be something of a circular argument here.) One instructor summed up the majority reaction: "I have mixed emotions about assigning rewrites in 101. The best students usually do them and profit from them. The worst students see them as a form of cruel and unusual punishment, which defeats the whole purpose of assigning them."

When the freshman students were asked their views on rewriting (their questionnaires were filled out anonymously, in an attempt to reduce the inevitable factor of telling the teachers what the students think their teachers want to hear) some clear patterns emerged from the 386 responses. Perhaps out of naive optimism, the students seemed to value rewriting more than did their instructors. One question posed was whether students thought rewriting was a good idea for most papers, weak papers, better papers, or a waste of time; they were also asked whether their composition grades were below average, average, or above. There was a definite correlation between having weaker grades and thinking weaker papers should be the ones rewritten, and between claiming above average grades and believing in the value of rewriting better papers. However, all of those few students who indicated that class discussion of their work had influenced their rewriting thought weaker or average papers, not better papers, should be the ones redone. As the responses came from students in both the first and second terms of composition, another pattern emerged: a higher percentage of 102 than 101 students thought better papers benefited the most from revision.

One could speculate that the weaker writers were more likely to think that rewriting primarily involved correcting surface errors, and, as weaker papers had more of these errors, such papers benefited the most from being redone. Better students perhaps wanted the chance to renew the mixed pleasure

of engaging themselves with a paper whose first version had been, perhaps because of the topic, somewhat successful and thereby more gratifying to write.

If one assumes that moving from 101 to 102 is a motion in the direction of advanced composition, and that a student with better grades in freshman composition is more like a student of advanced composition than is her less proficient classmate, then one might expect students in advanced composition to tend more towards preferring to rewriting their better efforts. This is, indeed, just what I found in my advanced writing courses.

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

In both my C 201 and C 301 courses, after the students wrote some half-dozen papers I asked them to select one of these papers for a thorough rewriting, and to include a report of what they changed and why.[2] With something approaching unanimity (the only significant exceptions being those few cases when the assignment had been misunderstood), the students in the more advanced course, C 301, selected one of their better papers to rework. In the less advanced course, C 201, a majority rewrote better work, but here, as in freshman composition, the weaker students were more inclined to take another shot at a relatively poor paper.

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that students should be encouraged to do what they prefer--I know some colleagues who might argue the obverse. Yet, there are advantages

to having students select for themselves, rather than being told by their instructor, what work to emphasize. They proceed less grudgingly, and the finished results, I found, have an improved quality that reflects the better motivation.

I was interested, though, not only in which papers were rewritten, but also in what aspects of the papers received more attention in the process. To make it easy on myself, ignoring the complex interrelations of form and content, I divided the possible aspects into content, organization, diction, and sentence structure. It seemed that most students in both courses, C 201 and C 301, were able to change, and add, content with relative facility. Differences here emerged only in that the better students added new content that was nearly always an improvement, while weaker students, like freshman writers, sometimes, for example, substituted examples that were no more relevant or convincing than those originally employed.

In organization, the C 301 students were appreciably more able to conceive and execute new patterns than were C 201 writers. The majority of the latter required help, through conferences, before they were able to reorganize their material effectively.

Changes in diction were made more frequently by the C 201 students, but wording changes made by the more advanced writers in C 301, while less frequent, were more often, in my judgment, clear improvements.

Changes in sentence structure were perhaps the most interesting. Nancy Sommers, comparing the revision of experienced writers to that of students, points out that the former place a much heavier emphasis upon rewriting on the sentence level.[3] I found this observation supported, indirectly, by seeing a connection between the level of students and the amount of changes made in sentence structure. (I am speaking not of correcting syntactical errors, but of substituting new "correct" patterns for previous, also correct, but less effective, ones). Most of my C 201 students resembled the majority of freshman students in finding it difficult to do more, in sentence revision, than occasionally combine shorter sentences through coordination. The C 301 students, by contrast, while they had more difficulty with revision of sentence structure than with other aspects of rewriting, on occasion were able to revise by using subordination, inversion, and parallelism to good effect, and could "uncombine" ungainly sentences. Indeed, it was in sentence structure that the most significant, if less facile, improvements were made in the revisions carried out by my C 301 students.

The revisions that my students decided to do were not, of course, a result only of their own re-seeing of their papers. The students were influenced by my comments, both those written on their papers and made in conference, and by comments from their classmates. These latter comments were important in both my advanced courses; unlike most freshman sections, C 201 and C 301 were run

on a quasi--"workshop" basis. Student papers were frequently reproduced and distributed to the class for response and evaluation. While my response to any individual paper ordinarily was not that different from the collective judgment of the class, the reaction of the writer of the paper, as reflected in subsequent rewriting, usually did show a significant differentiation between my views and the opinions of her classmates. Generally, my opinion was respected when I criticized content and organization; when fellow students found weaknesses in these areas, the writer would resist change, believing that she knew the subject better than did her peers. However, when I found fault with diction and sentence structure, while the students were polite and did not ignore my remarks, they displayed a certain tendency to think that I was being "picky" or using a typical English instructor's Socratic play of pretending not to understand--I got the "you know what I mean" response. By contrast, when his peers found that word choice or sentence structure interfered with understanding, or weakened impact, the author was bothered and took this criticism seriously in doing a rewrite. Criticism was not, certainly, all negative, but the same pattern was present regarding responses to favorable comments; encouragement, resulting in no change or in increased emphasis in rewriting, was valued more in regard to content if it came from me, in style if it came from fellow students.[4]

CONCLUSIONS

Observing, then, three levels of student work, that done in freshman composition, composition C 201, and composition C 301, I was able to think of a continuum of relatively inexperienced to relatively advanced students and reach four pedagogical conclusions regarding rewriting. First, the more advanced the students, the more valuable rewriting may be. Second, the more advanced the students, the more appropriate it is to have them rework their better papers. (It follows from this that teachers of advanced composition should sharpen a skill seldom called on in teaching freshman composition, the ability to suggest significant improvements that may be made in a paper already deserving, by most standards a "A". If we are teaching truly advanced composition we may have to teach the difference between "A" and "A+" work.) Third, to encourage students to do that which they find somewhat difficult yet rewarding, the more advanced the students the more revision of sentence structure should be emphasized. Finally, following from this, the more advanced the students, the more important is peer evaluation

These are not earth-shaking, nor other than tentative, conclusions; many instructors of advanced composition may already have reached them. However, I hope they at least suggest the value of seeing advanced composition in a comparative perspective, and of relating our teaching to our students' feelings about the work they are asked to do.

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NOTES

[1] In a funded project, Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, of the University of Texas at Austin, are investigating editorial decision-making of unskilled and skilled writers, but, to my knowledge, little attention has been paid to such questions; this footnote, rather than providing a "review of the research" will be explanatory. Nancy Sommers, in pointing out that "research in revision has been notably absent" ("Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers," CCC, 31 /December 1980/, 378.), blames this absence upon the prevailing "linear" view of the composition process. The general validity of Sommer's view (shared by Donald Murray), that revision is a continual part of writing, should not obscure the fact that rewriting, following evaluation, is frequently a "stage" in the production of the finished product. Although this stage will be influenced by what the writer has previously done with the manuscript (and will be remembered after the manuscript is resubmitted), it is sufficiently distinct, I believe to be separated, for consideration, from the ongoing flux of creativity. And that to treat rewriting as a separate stage is not an artificial requirement imposed on students (because of their mentors' unreal view of the composition process) will be realized by anyone who has asked for, and responded to, a colleague's reaction before submitting a paper for publication, or who has changed an article or book upon editorial advice.

Yet, if there is some theoretical validity or pedagogic utility to viewing the composition process as having "stages" (just as there are "stages", of thesis, antithesis, and thesis in dialectics), this does not mean that a stage may not itself be considered as process, and this process subjected to empirical investigation. But those who have written about the stage of rewriting, if they are not, as Sommers believes, inevitably trapped by a false model of the writing process, have, nevertheless, done little such investigation. Richard Lanham's Revising Prose (New York: Scribners, 1979), to take a recent example, while not without virtues, essentially merely expands to book length the editorial advice offered more briefly in many composition texts.

[2] I did not ask for more post-evaluative rewriting because I had "intuitively" reached the conclusion that, given a limited amount of time, students generally do better starting new projects than reworking old ones. This assumption, while perhaps challanged, was not really tested by the procedures reported in this paper; I hope it may be tested in the future.

[3] p. 386. She emphasizes though, that for the experienced writers the process is "recursive," and based on a "non-linear" theory, and not just part of a separate rewriting stage.

[4] As freshman students usually have more difficulty in criticizing style than in reacting to content, the result noted earlier, that when freshman rewriting was influenced by class discussion weaker papers were the ones selected for rewriting, may be explained. Freshman students, it would appear, were bothered by the more obvious faults characterizing their weaker papers because their classmates were better able to notice these faults.